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ABSTRACT

In a pilot study undertaken with the students and faculty members at the campus of Eastern New Mexico University, a cross-cultural survey was taken to determine whether levels of physical aggression in childrearing practices varied between cultural groups. Specifically, spanking as a form of discipline was studied among groups of 13 Anglo-Americans, 11 Blacks, 120 Hispanics, 13 Native Americans, and 15 Asians. Results of the survey showed that there were no significant differences with regard to treatment as children or treatment of children--all groups admitted to having been "sometimes spanked" as children and to later also spanking their own children. Where alternatives to spanking were concerned, Native Americans and Asians were least likely to give or withhold rewards to discipline their children, while Hispanics and Asians were the most likely to use shame. Anglo-Americans expressed the highest level of reservation about their actions; Hispanics and Blacks expressed lesser reservations (as did Native Americans), and Asians expressed no reservations. (Author/MP)

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CROSS-CULTURAL SPANKING PRACTICES--IMPLICATIONS FOR PARENTING AND EDUCATION

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CROSS-CULTURAL SPANKING PRACTICES--IMPLICATIONS FOR PARENTING AND EDUCATION

In recent years a controversy has arisen concerning the use and effectiveness of physical punishment to discipline children as opposed to non-physical types of positive behavior control. For the purposes of this paper, physical punishment will be defined as "the infliction of bodily pain as a penalty for doing something which has been disapproved of by the punisher". This definition was adopted by the N.E.A. Task Force on Corporal Punishment in 1972. The report stresses the current educational and psychological trend toward favoring non-physical punishment for children, and stands in contrast to the more popular 'how-to' books on parenting and child-management such as Dr. James Dobson's Dare to Discipline, (1980) and Dr. Fitzhugh Dodson's How to Parent (1970). Dr. Dobson, in particular, urges the use of spanking as an effective, if sometimes painful means of controlling children's undesirable behavior. His approach is admittedly Christian, and reflects the policy of 'spare the rod and spoil the child' which has characterized American child-rearing practices from the very beginnings of this nation (Greven, 1973). Indeed, Whiting and Child found in 1953 that only two of forty-seven cultures studied cross-culturally were as "severe on the younger child as is the typical middle-class white family" and that actually, "no culture in records is less permissive with children as we are" (Medinnus, 1967, p. 146). Perhaps this trend that we see reflected in the popular child-rearing literature of the day which endorses corporal punishment, is a sympton of the general uneasiness that Americans feel about the rising index of crime and violence which confronts us daily. Statistics show that since 1962, crime in America has risen sharply from an emphasis on property-taking to crimes of violence--homicide, rape, suicide,

child abuse, etc. (Taft, 1962, pp. 57-58). In the last few years we have passed legislation in a number of states to reintroduce the penalty of capital punishment for serious crimes, over the protests of experts who continue to urge moderation in prison reform through education and rehabilitation (Wilson & O'Leary, 1980, pp. 123-124). Seventeen states have passed laws that expressly permit corporal punishment in the schools, but four states forbid such action by legal decision. Maurer and Cryan both identify these states as being: Hawaii, Maine, Massachusetts and New Jersey (Cryan, 1981). Sweden, in sharp contrast to the United States, has long been the leader in passage of legislation forbidding physical punishment in the schools. The Swedish Children's Rights Commission passed such a law in 1962, and has recently passed a more controversial version which forbids parents to punish their children physically in the privacy of their homes. A public poll indicates that Swedish parents are satisfied with the ruling (Newell, 1980, p. 16). The commission asked the pointed question, when it declared in public hearing "We were legislating to protect children from violence. You cannot make an exception for family violence. You cannot legally hit grownups or your neighbors' children, so why your own?" (ibid.).

Why indeed? It seems that American society prefers to 'hit its own'. A recent study conducted by Straus revealed that 81 percent of U.S. parents questioned used corporal punishment on their children, and over 60 percent "spanked or beat their children on an average of at least once a week" (Gilmartin, 1979, p. 18). A comprehensive state survey on corporal punishment in the schools was conducted recnetly in Pennsylvania. Of 292 school districts responding, 269 officially approved the use of corporal punishment (although they did so in opposition to the opinion of the NEA Task Force on

Corporal Punishment quoted above) (Ratliff, 1980, p. 474). The debate rages on, as to the effectiveness of physical punishment, and for further clarification we might well turn to a cross-cultural approach to the subject.

Sociobiologists are now providing intriguing indications as to why specific cultural groups exhibit certain behavioral characteristics. The rather controversial implications of their research hints at genetic predispositions toward what we have previously labeled as cultural stereotypes--'the inscrutable Chinese', 'the volatile Italian', 'the stoic Indian', etc. Actually, Freedman in 1963 and in 1974 did seem to verify such stereotypes in his study of newborns in many different parts of the world (Fitzgerald, 1981, p. 17). He finds Caucasian, Black, and Japanese babies to be far more aggressive in their responses to bothering stimuli (an object dropped lightly on the face, such as a handkerchief), than are Chinese or Navajo newborns. The latter lie passively without crying, while the first three groups mentioned, flail about and cry. Chinese and Navajo peoples share similar linguistic roots and exhibit certain biological similarities, and according to Erickson (1950) and Sidel (1973) both groups respectively have non-physical ways of dealing with childhood discipline problems. Both favor an approach of love and understanding rather than resorting to corporal punishment in both schools and homes. It occurred to this author that perhaps there might be cultural and genetic predispositions toward violence in different human societies. American society being primarily Caucasion (including Hispanic), and Black, and being, according to experts quite agreeable to the use of physical punishment on their children, perhaps are merely reflecting a more generally aggressive tendency to react to life, as indicated in Freedman's study of newborns. Admittedly the

genetic similarity between Anglo, Black and Japanese groups is not as easily seen as between the Chinese and the American Indian, but their remarkable tendencies to respond to irritating stimuli aggressively (great mobility, excitability, intense distress reactions that are not easily comforted) are all shared by the first three groups of newborns and perhaps carry on in some form into adult life where they are reinforced by social modeling. It does seem quite likely that these common characteristics in stress-reaction are not due to a few days immersion in a common cultural milieu; rather it seems rather plausible that they are due to genetic similarities, and later, to environmental influences.

Obviously, environmental input certainly augments genetic propensities for certain cross-cultural behavioral differences. In light of this assumption, and in direct response to the Freedman study, a multi-cultural survey was undertaken in a pilot study at Eastern New Mexico University among students and faculty to uncover spanking practices among the following groups: Anglo (N=13), Black (N=11), Hispanic (N=12), Asian (N=15), and Native-American (N=13). There were 64 subjects in all, two-thirds were female, one-third was male; and two-thirds were young adults and one-third were middle-aged. Results of the survey showed that there were no significant differences between treatment as a child, and by spanking practices as an adult--all groups admitted to having been "sometimes spanked" as a child, and later also spanked their children as parents. Where alternatives to spanking were concerned, Native-Americans and Asians were least likely to give or withhold rewards to discipline their young (23% and 7%, respectively). Hispanics and Asians were the most likely to use shame (17% and 13% respectively, as opposed to 0% on the other groups). All groups similarly opted to use reason, or to 'raise voice' or change body language (all grouped around

the mean). Only Native-Americans admitted to using fear (15%--"Watch out or the _____ will get you..."). All groups were centered around the mean where the alternative of isolation (e.g., standing the child in the corner or sending to his room). When it came to declaring spanking to be "morally wrong" only the Asian group approached a level of significant difference (m=1.7). Anglos expressed the highest level of reservations about their actions (85%), Hispanics and Blacks (45%), expressed lesser reservations, as did Native-Americans (15%). Asians expressed no reservation. Reservations were listed in the form of written comments, and many if not most, indicated a certain amount of guilt over the practice of spanking; (most expressed concern that it could be over-exerted, or become physical abuse). As indicated above, Anglos indicated the highest percentage of a guilt index.

The American Psychological Association published a statement on corporal punishment in 1975. It emphatically deplores the use of physical punishment as childhood discipline and urges "more effective, humane, and creative ways of interacting with children" (Cryan, p. 5). Perhaps we should take a second look at physical punishment, as employed in our homes and schools, and draw upon cross-cultural comparisons of differences in aggressive tendencies in child-rearing practices, in order to have multiple models upon which to draw. Surely in our ever-increasingly violent world we need as many ways as possible to learn to curb our aggressions, so that we, as a society, and even as a planet, may learn to face the future with confidence and with hope in a better tomorrow.

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